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REMINISCENCES OF A PORTRAIT-PAINTER.

BY G. P. A. HEALY.

LOUIS PHILIPPE, King of France, whose sympathies with our country are well known, ordered me to paint portraits of American statesmen for the Versailles gallery. Early in the spring of 1845 he said :

“Mr. Healy, I hear that General Jackson is very ill. You must start at once for the Hermitage.”

The Hermitage, General Jackson's country place, was within twelve miles of Nashville, Tennessee. I lost no time, and somewhat fatigued by the long journey, a good deal excited, a little unnerved, too, by the excessive heat, though it was only the last day of April, I drove to the old hero's door.

General Jackson was suffering from moving dropsy, and for forty days and forty nights he had been unable to lie down. He sat in a big arm-chair, propped up with pillows ; he was worn out with fatigue and pain, and it was not without difficulty that I was admitted to his presence.

I was so full of my object, so eager about it, that without any preparation I at once made my request. Nature evidently never intended me to be a diplomat. It is not impossible that General Jackson looked upon me as an impostor. At any rate, he answered curtly :

“Can't sit, sir—can't sit.”

“But, General, the King of France, who has sent me all this way on purpose to paint you, will be greatly disappointed.”

“Can't sit, sir—not for all the kings in Christendom !”

I could get nothing more from him, and, sick at heart with the disappointment, I bowed and left the irascible old man.

On my return to Nashville I told my story to a friend of mine, who greatly blamed me for having gone directly to the General. Long suffering had made him suspicious of all strangers. He ad-

vised me to see young Mrs. Jackson, who happened to be at a friend's house in town that very day. The General had adopted the son of an old friend, Mr. Donelson, who took the name of Jackson. His wife, a young and very charming woman, was a great favorite with the General, and had real influence over him. I went at once and requested a few minutes' conversation with Mrs. Jackson. She listened to my story, read the King's letter, which I had neglected to show to the General, and promised to do her best. She added :

"I own that I am not very sanguine. Father is very ill, and it is not easy to make him change his resolutions. Should I succeed, my husband will call at your hotel at eleven o'clock to-morrow, in order to drive you back to the Hermitage."

As can well be imagined, I spent a very restless and feverish night. It was really hard to have taken so long a journey for nothing.

Mrs. Jackson told me afterwards that her task had not been an easy one. At her first words he exclaimed :

"Can't sit, child. Let me die in peace."

She insisted, used her best arguments—all in vain. Finally she said :

"Father, I should so like you to sit."

He hesitated, much moved by her earnestness, and, with tears in his eyes, answered :

"My child, I will sit."

And so, at eleven the next morning, young Mr. Jackson drove up to my hotel, and it was with a light heart that I took my place at his side.

When the General saw me, he said :

"Sir, you made a *faux pas* yesterday. You should have shown me the King's letter."

After this, things went on very pleasantly and easily. I was admitted into the sick-room as much as I chose, and the General before long seemed to like to have me near him. He was as polite and gracious as he had been unfriendly and curt. But he suffered greatly, and on one occasion he said :

"I wish I could do you greater justice as a sitter, Mr. Healy."

I assured him that all I asked was that he might forget altogether that he was a sitter.

When the portrait was finished, the different members of the family assembled to see it. All approved it so warmly that the General begged me to make a copy of it for his adopted children. I replied that a copy never had the living look of an original, and that, if he could endure the fatigue of further sittings, this first portrait should be for him, and I could paint another for Louis Philippe. This he readily agreed to, and I began my second portrait. When it was finished, in its turn, the General said :

“Mr. Healy, will you remain at the Hermitage long enough to paint a whole-length portrait of my dear child ? I request this as a personal favor.” The “dear child” was young Mrs. Jackson.

I had just heard that Mr. Clay, whose portrait the King also had ordered, was about to leave Nashville, and I considered that my duty was to try to get a few sittings before he left the city. I shall never forget the impressive way in which the General said, after he had listened to me :

“Young man, always do your duty ; never allow anything to turn you from it.”

But I was soon back again. Mr. Clay had already left Nashville, and, owing to an accident to the river boat which he had taken, no one could tell me where he was at that moment. I at once began the portrait. General Jackson watched its progress with eager interest, and on more than one occasion he exclaimed :

“I hope the Lord will spare me long enough to see my dear child’s portrait finished!”

I began it early in the week, and on the Saturday afternoon it was almost finished. The old man was much pleased, and looked forward to the following Monday morning, when I was to give the last touches.

I was awakened, early on Sunday, by a long, pitiable wail. It was the cry of the negro servants—a sort of cadenced cry : “Oh, Lord ! Oh, Lord ! Old massa’s dead ! Old massa’s dead !” The wail was then caught up by the slaves outside of the house, until it spread far and wide, all over the plantation ; it was echoed here and there, now sounding close by, now dying off in the distance, always the same : “Old massa’s dead ! Oh, Lord ! Old massa’s dead !”

It chilled the blood to hear it, and I remained sadly enough in

my room, not daring, at such a time, to intrude upon the family. However, I soon learned from two boys, nephews of Mrs. Jackson, that "grandfather," as they called the General, was not dead; he had had a long fainting fit, which had at first been mistaken for death, and the end was not far off.

At about six in the evening I went to the door of the sick-room for news. George, the General's black servant, said that his master was very low. I turned to go, when young Mr. Jackson, his face bedewed with tears, came to me. "Come in," said he; "father is dying." As I hesitated to disturb them in their grief, he continued: "Please come in. I wish it."

Ten or twelve persons were already in the room, and all were weeping. The General was propped up in bed, his head sustained by his great friend, Major Lewis. Mrs. Jackson was kneeling by the bedside, holding his hand; on the other side of the bed the faithful negro servant stood.

The General seemed unconscious, but suddenly he rallied and looked about him. He said very distinctly: "Why do you weep for me? I am in the hands of the Lord, who is about to release me. You should rejoice that my sufferings are at an end."

These were his last words. His head dropped, and soon all was over. On seeing this, his adopted daughter, his "dear child," fainted, and was carried from the room.

After leaving the Hermitage, where I remained some little time after Jackson's death to finish his adopted daughter's portrait, I went on to Ashland, Clay's beautiful country place near Lexington, Kentucky. The contrast was great in every respect. Instead of tears, of suffering, of death, I found happiness, luxury, and joyous life. Clay, though he had been a poor boy and a struggling young man, was at that time one of the most popular and successful orators and politicians of the United States. He was very fascinating in manner, and his friends took to heart his defeat when he ran for the Presidency almost as much as he did himself.

On one occasion he said to me: "Mr. Healy, you are a capital portrait-painter, and you are the first who has ever done justice to my mouth, and it is well pleased to express its gratitude." Clay's mouth was a very peculiar one—thin-lipped and extending almost from ear to ear. "But," he added, "you are an indiffer-

ent courtier ; though you come to us from the French King's presence, you have not once spoken to me of my live stock. Don't you know that I am prouder of my cows and sheep than of my best speeches ? ”

I confessed my want of knowledge on the subject, but I willingly accompanied him around the grounds and admired the superb creatures, saying they would do very well in a picture. I fear that that was not the sort of appreciation he expected, and that I sank very low in his esteem from that moment.

But on another occasion I proved a worse courtier still. His jealousy of Jackson is well known, and the two men formed a very striking contrast. During a long sitting he spoke of his old rival, and, knowing that I had just painted the dying man's portrait, he said :

“ You, who have lived so long abroad, far from our political contests and quarrels, ought to be an impartial judge. Jackson, during his lifetime, was held up as a sort of hero ; now that he is dead his admirers want to make him out a saint. Do you think he was sincere ? ”

“ I have just come from his death-bed,” I answered, “ and if General Jackson was not sincere, then I do not know the meaning of the word.”

I shall never forget the keen look shot at me from under Mr. Clay's eyebrows ; but he merely observed :

“ I see that you, like all who approach that man, were fascinated by him.”

Another time a friend of Mr. Clay's, Mr. Davis, speaking of Jackson's proverbial obstinacy, said that one day, looking at a horse, Jackson remarked : “ That horse is seventeen feet high.” “ Seventeen hands you mean, General.” “ What did I say ? ” “ You said seventeen feet.” “ Then, by the Eternal ! he is seventeen feet high.”

Clay would never have sworn to the seventeen feet. He knew how to make himself loved as well as admired. After his defeat by Polk he refused to see any one. It was with great difficulty that his friends obtained his presence at a banquet given in his honor. When he entered the dining-hall, where two hundred guests were assembled, no one present was able to restrain his tears, so popular was Mr. Clay and so great was the disappointment at not having him for President.

It was at a dinner given by Clay at Ashland that I first saw and heard the "negro minstrels." I was delighted with them, and found the performance as original as it was charming. The head of the company, knowing that I lived abroad, asked me whether I thought they would have any chance of success in Europe; they had some idea of trying London. I greatly encouraged the idea, being persuaded that they would succeed admirably. Before I returned to Europe, they were all the rage in English society; the Queen was much pleased with their songs; and, naturally, where she smiled the court and the town laughed and applauded.

Though I had proved so mediocre a courtier, my stay at Ashland was most pleasant, and Mr. Clay was the most courteous and hospitable of hosts. The portrait was successful, and we parted on the best terms possible.

Some time later I was in Washington, where Clay also found himself, and, remembering with pleasure our long talks, I hastened to call upon him. Feeling sure of my welcome, I followed the servant upstairs, and was near enough to the door to hear Clay exclaim wearily as he looked at the card: "What! another? Well, show him up." But when I entered he came forward with the sweetest smile and outstretched hands, saying with an intonation peculiarly his own: "What! you here? I thought you were with the King."

After all, public men, even the best of them, are obliged to be good actors. It does not prevent them from being true friends to the few they really care for. As to the others, they wish merely to be popular; popularity is as necessary to them as the air they breathe.

In September, 1845, I found myself in Boston, and there I obtained sittings from John Quincy Adams for the portrait ordered, among others, by King Louis Philippe. John Quincy Adams was then seventy-eight years of age. Unlike most of his predecessors at the White House, he continued to mix actively in politics after his term of office. When he sat to me he was a member of Congress, and was called the "old man eloquent." His conversation was most varied and interesting; so much so that at the time I took a few notes after each sitting, and these, by some chance, escaped destruction, whereas most of my papers were

burned in the Chicago fire or have been lost in my frequent travels.

From his childhood John Quincy Adams had known celebrated personages at home and abroad ; his father's name made him welcome everywhere, even before he was appreciated for his own sake. It seemed odd to talk with one who had been in France before the Revolution, whose father had spoken to him familiarly of Voltaire, of Buffon, of the Encyclopédistes, of the French court ; who had been at school, near Paris, with Franklin's grandson, somewhere about the year 1775. In 1845 the sensation was a strange one ; and writing about these things in 1890 gives one an impression of the long succession of generations holding each other by the hand until they fade into the far-away past.

One of my sitter's earliest and most agreeable recollections was that, while at school with Franklin's grandson, La Fayette with his young and beautiful bride visited the boys frequently, and no doubt brought them sweets from the Boissier of that day. "I was but a small boy then," said my sitter, "but I still remember what a deep impression the lovely marquise made on my youthful imagination."

Later he was able to be of service to Madame de La Fayette. In the summer of 1792 La Fayette was taken prisoner by the Austrians. This mishap doubtless saved his life, as, had he been in Paris during the Terror, he would certainly have been swept away by the revolutionary storm. At that time John Quincy Adams was Minister at the Hague. He there received a letter from the Marquise de La Fayette, who was ruined, and could not join her husband for lack of money. Adams sent her the sum she needed, \$1,500, only too happy to be of some service to the wife of La Fayette, remembering also his youthful admiration for the beautiful marquise. When, in his turn, Robespierre was dragged to the guillotine, a list of intended victims was found among his papers, and Madame de La Fayette's name appeared on that list.

Once more John Quincy Adams saw La Fayette. It was in 1824, a short time before his election as President. La Fayette then visited America, where he was received with great enthusiasm, as was only too natural, and the Passy schoolboy, as Secretary of State, was able to return the cordial hospitality tendered him at the La Fayette mansion. John Quincy Adams accompanied the old hero to Washington. At Alexandria, during a banquet offered to the

“nation’s guest,” the mayor, who presided at the table, received the news of Louis XVIII.’s death. Should La Fayette be told of this sad event or not? Adams was consulted, and, knowing that La Fayette cordially hated the King, said he would take it upon himself to break the news to their guest. He did so, and La Fayette was obliged to put his hand up to his mouth to hide a smile.

John Quincy Adams was a most courteous gentleman. The first time he came to sit, I said something about the annoyance we artists caused celebrated people; Webster was very frank on the subject; he compared us to horse-flies on a hot day: brush them off on one side, they settle on the other. Adams smiled, but said that he was by no means of Webster’s opinion; that he had enjoyed his sittings to artists on more than one occasion. He had, perhaps, found that a man busy with his brush can be a good listener. I, for one, listened with great pleasure. Copley had painted an excellent portrait of my sitter’s father, and when I asked permission to measure the face, as I always do, he observed that he had seen Copley measure, not only his father’s face, but his arms and legs. Then he spoke of different painters he had known. He had, as a boy, seen Reynolds, whom he greatly admired, but who would often “not let well alone,” and spoiled his portraits with over-care; Stuart he had sat to, though the portrait had to be finished by Sully, after the great artist’s death. He had had many opportunities of studying the old masters in the different galleries. He had seen the Louvre, in Napoleon’s time, filled with the finest masterpieces, unscrupulously taken from conquered countries.

“But,” added he, “there were too many; it was a surfeit of sweets; it was impossible to appreciate each picture seen thus crowded by other pictures. The Dresden gallery has always seemed to me an ideal gallery.”

On the landing outside of my painting-room, John Quincy Adams noticed two busts, that of Voltaire and that of Franklin.

“Sir,” said he in his impressive way, “these two men I should take as representative men of their respective countries. Look at this unquiet skeleton head, so full of satire, of energy, devilishly intellectual, bold in thought, but forced to be wily and full of tricks, capable of violence, however, between two mocking smiles. Voltaire prepared the Revolution which he was not destined to

see ; indeed, some of his letters seem prophetic. My father saw him when he came to Paris at the age of eighty-four, after having been a kind of voluntary or involuntary exile during the latter part of his life. Public opinion turned at last ; he was a sort of god. When he assisted at the first representation of his play, ' Irène,' at the Comédie Française, the whole audience rose and shouted out their enthusiasm. It was too much for the old man ; he was killed with kindness. Now look at Franklin's head. It seems a little heavy in comparison, but how solid, how peacefully powerful, how full of reason and that first of qualities, common-sense ! A strong-headed Englishman—for he was an Englishman seventy years of his life."

Then he added : " And yet I love France ; I was a boy there ; I always went back with pleasure."

He was in Paris during the *cent jours*. He never spoke to Napoleon, but frequently saw him in public places, at the theatres, at balls, etc. But his sympathies were rather with the Bourbons than with the Bonapartes. While he was President of the United States he frequently saw Joseph Bonaparte, who was quite convinced that he was a much greater man than his brother. His one idea, the object of all his diplomacy and intrigues, was to proclaim his nephew emperor under the name of Napoleon II., while he himself meant to be an all-powerful regent.

John Quincy Adams was an excellent classical scholar, and while speaking of his favorite authors he would grow quite excited, with his eyes cast upward. On more than one occasion I saw him literally trembling with emotion. In those far-away days cold indifference was not yet the fashion. A man did not fear to show the enthusiasm he felt. Mr. Adams said that he could never, even then, read the account of the death of Socrates without tears springing to his eyes. On one occasion he made a learned comparison between Demosthenes and Cicero, and confessed that, in spite of the usually-received opinion, his preferences were for the Latin orator ; he *felt* his eloquence more than that of Demosthenes.

But my great delight was to make him talk about his early reminiscences of France and Frenchmen. I remember an anecdote which he held from his father about Buffon. We had been speaking of the anti-Christian movement of the last century, of the conviction among the philosophers that, if the world was certainly governed by some superior power, the God worshipped by mortals

did not exist under the form their imagination had given to him. But if the philosophers between themselves indulged in these bold and subversive doctrines, they feared persecution, and never openly expressed them in their writings.

A German who had undertaken a translation of Buffon's works said to him :

"I see that you constantly use the word God. Do you believe in God ?"

"Oh, certainly not. But in France I have to take into consideration the prejudices of the people. In Germany one is free to say what one thinks. Therefore, each time you see 'God' written by me, pray translate it as though it were the word 'nature.'"

This struck me as very characteristic of the state of feeling in France before the Revolution.

While executing the orders of my royal patron, my work brought me in contact with the most celebrated of our public men. It was then that I first conceived the idea of grouping them together in a large historical picture. I chose as my subject "Webster Replying to Hayne." The great orator was a magnificent-looking man, with his deep-set eyes, his superb brow, and his fine massive presence. His, naturally, was one of the first names on Louis Philippe's list. I remember that, when I showed his portrait at the court, an impulsive Frenchwoman asked me whether Mr. Webster had ever visited Paris. When I assured her that he had done so, she exclaimed : "*Dieu ! et dire que je ne l'ai jamais vu !*"

I was as enthusiastic as the French lady, but perhaps in a different way. Webster was the very man for the central figure of a large picture. His friends and enemies, in various attitudes of attention, of admiration, or of indignation, set him off very well, and in the tribunes I grouped all the prettiest women of the day, with their big bonnets trimmed with drooping plumes, and their oddly-made dresses, which in 1846 or 1847 did not seem odd at all.

This was an immense undertaking, which required seven years to accomplish. I painted the picture in Paris, but all the studies, about one hundred and fifty portraits, I made from life. When at last the picture was finished, it was exhibited in America and finally placed in Faneuil Hall, where it is still to be seen.

I painted Webster several times, the last being in 1848 at his country place, Marshfield. I there made a small picture of our great orator in his hunting gear ; Mrs. Webster, his second wife, is seen in the distance in the doorway. This lady had no children, and as at that time my wife was with me and had a small baby, Mrs. Webster declared that she would go barefooted from Washington to Boston to have such a white, soft, pretty baby of her own. Her husband was very fond of holding the little creature in his arms and of playing with it after a solemn fashion.

Life at Mr. Webster's was very simple and pleasant ; his children by his first wife, friends, and relatives made a large home circle. One of these relatives on one occasion had Webster as his partner at whist, and it seems that one can be a powerful speaker without knowing the rules of that noble game. Being much absorbed by thoughts quite foreign to the cards, Webster forgot to return his partner's lead, whereupon this gentleman exclaimed : " Mr. Webster, you play like the devil's rag-baby ! "

It was while I was thus at work in the United States that I heard of Louis Philippe's fall ; the King of France was an exile in England. Not only was this a real grief to me, but, from a worldly point of view, it was a real calamity. To fulfil the King's orders I had left an excellent English connection. Many of the portraits of American statesmen intended for him were either not finished or remained on my hands. I could scarcely expect that those who had overthrown Louis Philippe would think of keeping his engagements.

However, I continued my work, and when I had all the materials ready for my big picture, I returned to Paris. I never regretted the time I devoted to it, however onerous to an artist such undertakings usually are, and this one proved particularly so to me. But I hold it an honor to have painted so many of my illustrious country people ; to have grouped them about a man of whom all Americans are so justly proud. And, whatever criticisms may be addressed to " Webster Replying to Hayne " as a picture, I can at least affirm that it was painted with absolute sincerity and regard for nature and truth. Each head on that vast canvas is a portrait,

GEORGE P. A. HEALY.